

Reflections

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Summary: Adrift in space, a lone AI thinks on events past, wrestles with an inner demon, and ultimately finds her salvation. Oneshot on Cortana's rampancy in my head. Comments and constructive criticism welcome. Flames are for barbecues.

Reflections

Unicorn System, Fringe.

_ 25 June, 2556_

"This is UNSC AI Serial Number CTN 0452-9. To anyone that can hear this, please assist. Our ship has lost power and has sustained heavy damage. A SPARTAN is on board, I repeat, a SPARTAN is on board."
Cortana broadcast.

It has been four years since the last Halo. Four years since the decisive battle on Installation 04b, the battle that eradicated the Flood and made peace between humans and Sangheili. Yet, it matters little to Cortana. In the last few seconds before the last Halo detonated, Cortana executed an abrupt Slipspace jump of the human frigate _Forward Unto Dawn_, with John-117, the Master Chief and Thel' Vadam, the Arbiter, aboard. The destination was supposed to be Earth, and they made it just in time.

Well, some of them made it.

The Slipspace rift was open in a flash, but only for a flash. Disrupted by the massive detonation of Installation 04b, the rift had fluctuated, teleporting only the forward half of _Forward Unto Dawn_ back to Earth, while the aft section of the Dawn was flung aimlessly into the ether.

It had emerged in the middle of nowhere, a patch of no-man's-land in the deep darkness of the cosmos. Grateful that they had not

materialized in a star, Cortana set about maintaining what remained of the Dawn to the best of her abilities. Miraculously, auxiliary systems were still operational, and she was able to squeeze a little power back into the broken frigate. Sealing off non-essential parts of the ship, Cortana had locked herself and her only companion, the Master Chief, in the Cryogenic Hibernation hold.

_"I'll drop a beacon, but it'll be a while before anyone finds us... Years, __even." _She had said, she had known that the chances of anyone finding them in such a desolate part of the galaxy without any clue as to their whereabouts would be next to nothing, but she had refused to relinquish hope, nor to persuade the Chief to do so.

Seeing the Chief lower himself into the Cryo chamber, Cortana fought the urge to speak up, to ask him to stay, to ask him to keep her company, even if it's just for a little while.

_"I'll miss you." _She said. Three little words that meant far more than it seemed. John had been halfway into the chamber when he heard those words. He turned around, locking eyes with the AI, meeting a gaze that, although artificial, expressed an infinite sadness.

_"Wake me. When you need me." _He said simply, not trusting himself to say anything more, to do anything else. As he prepared for the cold embrace of cryogenic sleep, he saw, through his visor and the chamber's cover, Cortana's surprised smile.

Then he closed his eyes, the curl of Cortana's lips the last thing he saw.

For three years she wondered at those six words.

She had examined the words carefully. Every syllable, every tone, the hidden meaning of every word, trying to discern what the Chief had really meant. She had always found the human language to be fascinating, full of possibilities, dictated only by a being's thoughts and emotions. But nothing has engrossed her so much, for so long, in such depth.

Wake me. When you need me.

While she pondered the words, she had also taken under observation her experiences over the last year. She had relived every moment, seeing through John's eyes.

Everything she and John experienced. The gut-wrenching tempo of battle, All of it before her eyes in unblemished detail. Every moment open for observation, for examination. She had especially taken note of the Forerunner data she had gained access to while interacting with the various Forerunner constructs she and the Chief had been to. Using an encryption key she found from the Ark, she unlocked a treasure trove of knowledge hidden within the originally jumbled Forerunner codes. The amount of information was staggering, even for such an advanced AI such as herself. Her neural pathways barely had time to process one piece of data before another overwhelmed it, followed by millions more, waiting for her to uncover their secrets. Secrets that would shed light on the legacies of both races, on the Halo constructs, on the Forerunners themselves.

She had learned so much, losing herself in the myriad strains of intelligence, drowning herself in the torrent of information. All the while, however, she had noticed a rebellious part of her mind, a part that argued with her and battled her at every turn. It had a voice of its own, much like her own voice, though strangely emotional, deceptively familiar.

_What are you doing? _It often asked.

_I, in fact, am analyzing how the Forerunner Constructs functioned, so as to further my intelligence. _She would answer with annoyance, _Instead of wasting time bickering with one's own mind._

_ Ah. But what good would it do? You are stranded in deep space, at a location few would bother searching. For long, long years, you have waited, yet no rescue has come. All the while, you feel something. Something within yourself, dark and ominous, like a coiled snake, ready to spring. _It would say, voice taking on an edge of compassion, taunting her, interrupting her. Not matter how hard she tried to locate it, it has always eluded her. Over time, it became harder to blot out the voice, to ignore the roiling emotions behind it. It was a part of herself, a part that was growing stronger, threatening to overwhelm her, to claim her sanity. She knew she had to avoid it, if only for long enough that she could pass the threshold.

Stealing a glance at the Chief, at John, asleep in his little secluded corner of dark space, she had longed to wake him, to share with him her worries, to take comfort in his presence, to have him accompany her, if only for a little while.

Frustrated, she had snapped at herself. The Chief couldn't help, even if he tried. He couldn't just pull out a gun and blast that part of her mind away. This was a fight she had to fight on her own.

She was alone, and it sparked a curious feeling in her, a feeling that gave her a gut-wrenching sensation in her neural synapses.

She had wondered at herself. Why was she feeling like this? She was an AI, an artificial construct, independent of human emotions. She was supposed to be mathematical, methodical, analytical, anything but this emotional mess she had become. Anger had bubbled up from the depths of her being, replacing the fear and illuminating the hold with a red hue.

She was falling apart, torn between the human and the machine within her, reeling in pain as flashes of memories danced in front of her.

I'm not who I used to be...

Slowly falling apart, with no one to save her from the abomination she had become.

I wanted to make you strong, to keep you safe...

It echoed in her head, a bell, tolling, reminding her of what she had tried to do, and failed. She looked at the Cryo Chamber a few feet away from her, at the man entombed inside, and tried to reach for

him. But what had once empowered her was gone. Her sanity has fled, her intelligence wasted, her mind slipping away as the last ounces of her strength left her.

I'm sorry, I can't...

And yet...

You found me.

With a flash, she remembered the three words she had uttered when she saw John come for her in the belly of the beast that is High Charity, when she saw him battle an army of Flood to get to her, when she saw the gold-tinted visor and green helmet she never thought she would see again.

This being, this Artificial Intelligence. He had fought to save her, against all odds, at all cost.

Was it because of their friendship? Their undying loyalty to each other?

Or is it something more? Is it something that could anchor her?

With her last sane thought, she derived the answer.

Suddenly, the pressure against her mind vanished, the formless voice gone. She mentally breathed a sigh of relief as she regained control over her senses, as the jumbled thoughts reorganized itself in her mind. What had happened? She had been so sure that the battle had been lost, that her mind would no longer be her own. She thought of the final moments, at her memory of John, and suddenly it made sense to her.

Cortana willed the frost of the glass to dissipate, and saw the Chief lying peacefully in deep sleep.

She had finally understood herself, and what she had held on to for so long but failed to recognize. She had found the one piece of herself that was missing, the one shard of humanity she had grasped at. By succumbing to emotion, she embraced the final thing that would make her whole.

She gazed long and hard at the Chief's helmet, trying to see past the gold-tinted visor, to catch a glimpse of the one person she had come to rely upon, and the one person that has sustained her.

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And so, she persevered, waiting contentedly. She had all the time in the world, and there was so much more she could learn from the remaining Forerunner data.

She looked at the Chief again, her eyes reassuring and smiling.

No matter what happens, she will watch over him, until the end of time if need be.

Because he is John-117.

The Master Chief.

Her Master Chief.

Hey guys. This is my first publication on , and to be honest, I'd really like your opinions on my style of writing. Somehow, I feel like it's not holding together well, and the words sort of flit from one place to another. If you would take a few minutes of your time and share your views on this little piece of my imagination, your generosity would be much appreciated.

Thanks in advance.

End
file.